



THREE ARTICLES ON THE AMERICAN AND ELIZABETHAN
THEATRE.

By

JOHN RAWSON SPEER

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE.

Nearly every since the population of the world became a hundred more than Adam and Eve, a strong desire for dramatic expression was found in the human soul. We learn from history that ever since the beginning of time people sought amusement. The Roman theatre is among the earliest. With the sanction of Queen Elizabeth, herself a lover of pageants and revels, the theatre began to advance. It became more and more a picture of life as it is than a place where feats of strength and stunts of various natures were performed.

Before Shakespeare was born the nearest approach to drama was the solemn mysteries and moralities. These were either given in the church or under the holy sanction of the church. Drama in England began in the church as it began in early Greece. They used this form as means of creating religious fear or as a means of teaching by visualization. But as time went on the drama became more and more amusing, and even the fearful warning of the figure of Satan became a comic character.

Finally little groups of players and minstrels sprang up. Nearly every lord had his troupe of players, and thus the drama began to become professional. Early presentations were given in the halls of lords or in the streets of the town.

When Shakespeare was but a lad of twelve, the first theatre was built. Gradually the drama drifted away from the altar of the church until Shakespeares time, it was entirely banished. In fact, the church now strongly objected to the theatre claiming that it was an instrument of the Devil. Much of this narrow prejudice now remains in the church to-day.

Shakespeare is almost the creator of drama and in his time the theatre attained a perfection that has not been surpassed in three centuries of activity and advancement.

In 1599, the Globe theatre was erected near London and here began a new presentation of drama. There were other theatres, but this one is more interesting since Shakespeare, who owned a part of the Globe, had his company of players here. With the growing opposition of the church and influence of the puritans along with the smallness of London where space was lacking, the theatre was built in an open field on the other side of the Thames.

There ^{was} ~~is~~ not any roof over the theatre and the only seats ^{were} ~~are~~ small pews or boxes on each side of the stage. In these seats the better class of patrons sat, while the penny tradesmen and farmers stood up in the large arena which would now constitute the most favorable seats in our modern theatre of today. The stage has no proscenium arch, but is a mere platform extending well out into the audience. A balcony is on the stage where possibly the early Juliet tossed flowers to the passionate Romeo. On top of the balcony is a tower where a flag is placed which is used to let the people know in London that there is a play to be given in the theatre. When the play starts the flag is lowered to let them know the performance is begun. Perhaps in this tower there ^{was} ~~is~~ machinery used to lower certain spirit characters down upon the stage. It is truly hard to realize that in such a crude place as this is that "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" were first presented to the world.

Although the Globe does seem crude in comparison with our modern play houses, how much better it was to play there

than in a lord's palace or in a street as were many of the early plays presented.

It is good that queen Elizabeth enjoyed drama or perhaps the theatre would not have developed so soon. In summing up my very short treatment of such a lengthy subject, of which I could write many pages, I will say that practically speaking Elizabethan drama developed with Shakespeare. For he took the drama as a foundling infant and brought it to the huskiness of manhood. After all plays have not changed a great deal since Shakespeare's day. Have they?

John Rawson Jones

MODERN THEATRES AND STAGING

Since the first rude stage and theatre made its debut upon the face of the world, a great deal of advancement has been made. What was the cheapest and least desirable seats in the Elizabethan theatre now comprise the best seats of our modern theatre.

Like the young child who became a man by "jest growin" so did the roofless barn of Shakespeare's time become a place of art and beauty. One of the first big advancements was when the lights were placed in the theatre and a roof constructed overhead. Gradually, bit by bit, the theatre grew and changed until the stage was no longer a barren platform, but a framed picture with living subjects and changing ideas.

One of the most impressive things in our modern theatre is the scenery. Of course the gorgeous auditorium is indeed a pleasant sight, but after all, what we really attend the theatre for is the show itself. The careful student of the drama having read both medieval and modern plays, will notice at the close of all Shakespeare's plays the little word exit or ~~exunt~~. This is because in his day there was no drop curtains and he had to allow the actors their chance to get off the stage so the audience might know that particular scene was finished. Today the closing of each act in the play is shown by the dropping of a curtain close to the footlights. The idea of a drop curtain was first carried out with rude rollers or barrels at the bottom of the scene. When the curtain was to be raised they merely rolled up this round roller. Later they built the stage up past the frame of the proscenium arch and made a curtain loft. Then the curtain was merely elevated to this loft out of the sight of the audience. This method is still in use and will probably never be

improved upon.

The lighting of our modern theatre has also enjoyed a very marvelous advancement made possible by the invention of electricity. Very likely there are many people in this world today who remember of a time when the theatre was lit by gas. There may even be some who can recall when candles were the chief form of theatre illumination. A candle placed in front of a tin shield made a dim but fairly proficient footlight in the days of pre-electricity. Can you imagine how disconcerting it would be to have a small boy armed with a flaming stick run across the stage during the interesting part of the play and poke his fiery instrument into the footlights to replenish the burnt out spirits of the candles? Whenever any moonlight or queer lighting was desired, a blue slide in a magic lantern projected the desired shade upon the stage. Today the playgoer is able to enjoy every color and lighting effect imaginable in the theatre. Forest fires, ocean storms, and lightning are produced with startling realism. The moving pictures have done much to better the stage effects of today, also.

Even the acting has changed since Shakespeare first trod the dusty boards. At one time all of the actors were post graduate orators and all of their emotional scenes were done like a school boy declaiming "the boy stood on the burning deck" This very unnatural method has given away to very realistic speech on the part of the actor. In the theatre today every attempt is made to reproduce life upon the stage as it actually exists in the walks of the theatregoer. The modern play is like life itself.

Play writing and plays have also changed since the days of "Romeo and Juliet". No longer do we have five act modern drama. The longest of any play is four acts and the usual play is only

three acts long. The modern play-write has discovered that a unison of effect is necessary in putting over an idea. When the action of a play jumps from a scene in the mountains to the lowlands then to the river, then back to the hills and so forth, it soon becomes hard to follow with out adopting a purely diagrammatical attitude.

It is true the theatre has changed in every way since it was first made a public place. Shakespeare would very likely enjoy seeing one of his plays produced as they are today with modern settings and costuming. Despite all they may say of playing his work on a barren stage as he did, I hold the fact that the audience has never yet expressed displeased opinion with our scenery. And its likely that if Shakespear had of known the art of scene painting he would have very likely given Hamlet a painted grave yard in which to find his father's skull.

Omni

THE SEX PLAY

Much has been said and threatened about the sheer vulgarity of the score of plays now popular on Broadway. Many people have gone away from the theatre blushing and admonishing the horrible language and plot of the modern play.

It is true that many of the plots of the later plays are not quite the kind which a child would understand or enjoy. But why should the mature minds of grown people be played by innocent childish themes? Is it any more uneven to ask a man to see a child's play than to ask a child to see a man's play. Theatres classes should be divided and a theatre made for children only. There innocent and helpful stories might be played. As long as the players must play to a mixed audience of children and men we cannot expect to find intellectual plots in our theatre.

Recently I read an article by a New York minister. He was very indignant in his condemnation of the modern sex play claiming that they were the ruination of the morals of the American public. He also declared that it was wrong to allow high-school and college students to attend such plays. I wonder what play he had ever seen now popular that had any thing but plain spoken truth in its plot?

In Eugene O'Neil's "Anna Christie" we have strong but very natural language spoken as one will find it in the walks of life. We see Anna Christie, the girl who has become good by love. Is it not beautiful? What is there in his play but love? Of course he has shown the harsh bitterness of a girl missused in life; he has drawn the narrowness of man. Anna was a bad woman, but what girl would care to be like her as the playwright paints her?

In his play "Desire Under the Elms", we have a wretched tale of life. The play is not beautiful, but it shows the despair of sin.

"Damaged Goods" was not a fairy story, but where could one find a more inspiring object lesson? I think that any boy of sixteen should be encouraged to see this play. There is nothing in the three acts of the play but the truth and it sends a very deep warning of nature to every man and woman. Should such plays be condemned because they touch on subjects usually spoken in a whisper?

I think, however, that when strong language and sex subjects are used to make an audience laugh with morbidity, then objection should be upheld.

Supposing that Shakespeare were to have ^{been} censored for his speech in many of his tragedies? What a handicap he would have felt! and in studying history we find that many narrow minded puritans did oppose the use of strong language on the stage.

How can we ever hope to escape the eternal triangle and mortgage in our serious drama unless we devote to deeper thoughts than love, villainy and heroism? At least one can credit "Anna Christie" as a play positively devoid of a triangle. All though there have been many plays written since the first, the plots all circle around one idea. The sex play is a thorough escape from this. If theatres were made merely to entertain then vaudeville is good enough, but if man will only look upon the theatre as a place or institute of art and refinement he will find there is no greater medium for expression of every type.